

# Hawaiian Poi Dog

The **Hawaiian Poi Dog** (Hawaiian: 'īlio or 'īlio māku'e) is an [extinct breed of pariah dog](#) from [Hawai'i](#) which was used by [Native Hawaiians](#) as a spiritual protector of children and as a [source of food](#).

## History



Ancient Hawaiian petroglyphic depiction of a native dog, [Hawaii Island](#)



A *lei niho 'īlio* made from the teeth of the poi dog and olona fiber, [Bailey House Museum](#)

The original Hawaiian poi dog were descended from the [Polynesian dogs](#) brought to the Hawaiian Islands by the [Polynesian people](#). Genetic studies on the [New Zealand Kurī dog](#) indicate that the origin of this dog (and therefore probably the Hawaiian dog) is [Indonesia](#). Referred as the 'īlio in the [Hawaiian language](#), the modern name of this breed is derived from *poi*, a Hawaiian [staple food](#) made from *kalo* or *taro* root. Poi was used to fatten the dogs for use as food because meat was too valuable to be used as dog food. Since the [Hawaiian Islands](#) did not have large land mammals other than [feral hogs](#), Poi dogs were not needed for hunting. The dogs were never deliberately bred to a standard, but [human](#) and [natural selection](#) still came into play.

Hawaiian Poi Dog	
	Hawaiian Poi Dog (left) in sketch by <a href="#">Louis Choris</a> , c. 1816–17
<b>Other names</b>	'īlio, 'īlio māku'e, Hawaiian Dog
<b>Origin</b>	Ancient Hawaii
<b>Breed status</b>	Extinct
Dog ( <a href="#">domestic dog</a> )	

European explorers like [Captain Cook](#) encountered pot-bellied, short-legged poi dogs that freely associated with hogs in the village. The dogs had very short hair that could come in any color, but brown poi dogs were regarded as distinct enough to warrant a specific name. The dogs also had peculiarly flattened heads. The latter trait is sometimes ascribed to the diet of the dogs in some unspecified way. Considering that poi does not require chewing, the dogs may have lost the need to maintain strong [temporalis muscles](#); a reduced [temporal fossa](#) will cause a dog's head to appear flattened.<sup>[1]</sup> Poi dogs were considered rather dim-witted and sluggish – any good hunting dog with acute senses would neither make a good poi dog nor be particularly useful on the islands – however, the dogs were strong-willed and not easily commanded.<sup>[2]</sup>

The poi dog was a two-purpose breed – used for food and as a [lucky charm](#). Unsuit for anything else, the breed declined to extinction as the native religion was abandoned and eating [dog meat](#) became unfashionable. [Feral dogs](#) of European settlers interbred with the poi dogs, and by the early 20th century at latest, the breed disappeared as a distinct entity.

## Surviving depictions

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*Vue de Honolulu. Iles Sandwich*,  
drawing by [Barthélémy Lauvergne](#),  
c. 1836. Detail crop shows a spotted  
dog with prick ears and a long tail.

No surviving artwork or photograph from Hawaiian history are authentically attributed as poi dogs. Often Western artists infused Euro-American characteristics in their 18th-century depictions of the dogs of Polynesia and by the 19th century, the dogs being depicted were of foreign breeds. The lack of details has led historians to guess at what works may be realistic depictions of the breed based on the physical characteristics.<sup>[3]</sup>

Writers [Katharine Luomala](#) and Margaret Titcomb both agreed an unfinished line drawing, dated to c. 1816–17, by French artist [Louis Choris](#), who was part of the exploring expedition of [Otto von Kotzebue](#), may show one of the dogs in center which may resemble the extinct breed. Luomala also claims French artist [Barthélémy Lauvergne](#) possibly captured a dog with the same traits in his colored drawing of [Honolulu Harbor](#) in 1836.<sup>[4][5][6]</sup>

Ancient Hawaiian [petroglyphs](#) depict simplified representations of the dogs. They often show the curly tails and pointed ears characteristic of the breed. [\[4\]](#)[\[7\]](#)

## Breeding program



A female from the [Honolulu Zoo](#) program, c. 1969

In 1967, Jack L. Throp, director of the [Honolulu Zoo](#), attempted to [bring back](#) the breed through selective breeding of local dogs based on [morphological](#) characteristics. The project studied 18th- and 19th-century descriptions of the dog before 1825 and also the surviving skeletal remains of the ancient breed to set a standard. From this, they selected local dogs in Hawaii, who were then bred for the desired traits. By the third generation from the original dogs selected in the program, a female was born with the desired appearance of the ancient breed. [\[8\]](#)[\[9\]](#)[\[10\]](#)[\[11\]](#)

Commenting in 1969, Throp noted:

The Honolulu Zoo undertook a project in 1967 to re-create the Polynesian dog. The purpose behind such a project is to tell the story of the animal life of the [Hawaiian Islands](#) in a living Hawaiian exhibit. The dog is an important part of the Polynesians' contribution to this story. [\[8\]](#)

The program is thought to have discontinued shortly afterward. [\[12\]](#) In 1976, the crews on the [Hōkūle'a](#) on their expedition to recreate the historical Polynesian voyage between Hawaii and [Tahiti](#) brought along a dog from this program, which they named Hoku. [\[13\]](#)

## Usage

Today, the term "poi dog" is most often used to refer to mutts or [mixed breed dogs](#), but also attribute specific characteristics to poi dogs, including the ability to eat anything, a strong will, and a unique appearance composed of different breeds. The term "poi dog" is also colloquially used to describe people of mixed heritage, although the more common term in use is [hapa](#). [\[14\]](#)[\[15\]](#)[\[16\]](#)

## See also

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- [Kuri](#) – extinct breed of Polynesian dog native to [New Zealand](#)
- [Marquesan Dog](#) – extinct breed of Polynesian dog native to the [Marquesas Islands](#)
- [Tahitian Dog](#) - extinct breed of Polynesian dog native to [Tahiti](#) in the [Society Islands](#)
- [Polynesian dog](#)
- [Askal](#)
- [Taiwan dog](#)
- [Philippine forest dog](#)
- [Domesticated plants and animals of Austronesia](#)
- [List of dog breeds](#)
- [List of extinct dog breeds](#)

## Footnotes and references

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1. Compare the high head of [fighting dog breeds](#) that typically have extremely strong temporalis muscles attaching to large and deep temporal fossae.
2. [Coren 2006](#), pp. 137–168.
3. [Luomala 1960a](#), pp. 195–197.
4. [Titcomb & Pukui 1969](#), pp. 2–3, 5–6.
5. [Luomala 1960a](#), pp. 195–197, 209.
6. [Luomala 1962](#), pp. 170–180.
7. [Luomala 1960a](#), pp. 197, 216, 221.
8. [Titcomb & Pukui 1969](#), pp. 22–23.
9. [Coren 2006](#), pp. 138–140.
10. [Hemmer 1990](#), pp. 33–34.
11. "To revive early poi dog". *The Honolulu Advertiser*. Honolulu. May 18, 1967.
12. [Williams 2015](#), pp. 30–31.
13. [Lewis 1978](#), p. 187.
14. [Sharma2011](#), p. 122.
15. [Haas 2011](#), p. 25.
16. [Reinecke & Tsuzaki 1967](#), p. 110.

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## Further reading

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## External links



Wikimedia Commons has media related to [Dogs of Hawaii](#).

- [Photographs of Hawaiian dog petroglyphs by Jean Charlot](http://library.manoa.hawaii.edu/departments/charlotcoll/murals/mural26.php) (<http://library.manoa.hawaii.edu/departments/charlotcoll/murals/mural26.php>) Archived (<https://web.archive.org/web/20161230000826/http://library.manoa.hawaii.edu/departments/charlotcoll/murals/mural26.php>) 2016-12-30 at the [Wayback Machine](#)
- [Photographs of Hawaiian dog petroglyphs at Nu'uanu, O'ahu by Christopher M. Butin](https://www.flickr.com/photos/b0dy_c0unt/4324028061/) ([https://www.flickr.com/photos/b0dy\\_c0unt/4324028061/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/b0dy_c0unt/4324028061/))